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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the response rates of university graduates on the following three formats of a questionnaire: (1) a two-page questionnaire that is to be returned with an accompanying self-addressed stamped envelope; (2) a format using smaller type and condensed format to present the questionnaire items on a single page that is to be returned with an accompanying self-addressed stamped envelope; and (3) the single-page questionnaire incorporated into a self-mailer in lieu of the return envelope. A wide-scale questionnaire mailing to university baccalaureate graduates surveyed their perceptions on the effectiveness of their education. For 19 out of 20 questions, graduates had to respond on a 4-point scale. The last question was an open-ended item that was keyed to the original 4-point scale. The three questionnaires and return envelopes were identifiable only by college, and there was no follow-up mailing. Of 7,078 questionnaires sent, 1,830 (25.7 percent) were returned. Response percentages across the 3 questionnaires were 27.9 percent, 26.3 percent, and 23.3 percent, respectively. There were no significant differences in the proportions responding to the two formats with the return envelope. Significantly more graduates responded to the two-page format than to the self-mailer. Significantly more graduates responded to the one-page with return envelope format than to the one-page self-mailer. (RLC)

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RESPONSE RATE EFFECTS OF THREE QUESTIONNAIRE FORMATS

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Response Rate Effects of Three Questionnaire Formats

Low return rates are not uncommon for follow-up studies of university graduates (Smith & Bers, 1987). To increase the chance of graduates returning follow-up questionnaires, researchers have examined many factors including: the appearance of the questionnaire (Boser, 1990); the length of the questionnaire (Harvey, 1988); and the sponsorship and postage (Armstrong & Lusk, 1987; Fox, Crask & Kim, 1988). After reviewing research on mailed questionnaire response rates, Baumgartner and Heberlein (1984) noted the need for research on the effects of a wide range of questionnaire lengths on response rate. Although earlier studies had found higher response rates for stapled sheets versus single page questionnaires, no significant difference was found in a more recent investigation by Harvey (1988). In a related investigation, Boser (1990) found no significant difference in response rates for stapled pages versus a booklet style questionnaire.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this investigation was to contrast response rates of university graduates to three formats for the same questionnaire: (1) A two-page questionnaire, to be returned in an accompanying self-addressed stamped envelope; (2) A format utilizing smaller type and condensed format to present the questionnaire items on a single page, to be returned in an accompanying self-addressed stamped envelope; and

(3) The single-page questionnaire incorporated into a self-mailer in lieu of the return envelope.

Method

A wide-scale questionnaire mailing to university baccalaureate graduates was made to survey their perceptions on the effectiveness of the education they had received. For 19 of 20 questions, graduates were asked to respond on a four-point Likert scale. The twentieth question was an open-ended item, keyed to the original four-point scale. Selection of the questionnaire format, style, directions and mailing procedures were consistent with desirable and validated questionnaire characteristics (Boser & Clark, 1992). The three questionnaire formats were sequentially assigned within each college. Since the questionnaires and return envelopes were only identifiable by college, responses were anonymous and there was no follow-up mailing.

Results

Of 7078 questionnaires sent, 1830 were returned (25.7%). Response percentages across the three questionnaire formats were: (1) 27.9%; (2) 26.3%; and (3) 23.3%. As shown in Table 1, these response rates were similar across colleges.

In contrasting proportions, there was no significant difference in the proportions responding to formats (1) and (2), the two formats using the return envelope ($z=1.274$, $p>.05$). Significantly more responded to the two-page format (1) than to format (3), the self-mailer ($z=3.633$, $p<.05$). Similarly, significantly more responded to format (2), the one-page with return envelope, than format (3), the one-

page self-mailer ($z=2.360$, $p<.05$). Thus, significantly more responses were received using the first two formats which both used an enclosed return envelope than the third format which used a self-mailer.

In contrasting student responses across the three questionnaire formats, only one significant difference was noted among the 20 questionnaire items. As shown in Table 2, that item rated the Office of Career Planning and Placement.

Discussion

Although the overall response rate of this survey of university graduates was low, it was not an uncommon outcome (Smith & Bers, 1987). Significant differences were noted in the response rates of the three questionnaire formats. However, there may be limited practical significance of these findings with the limited 28%, 26% and 23% response rates. Initially, there was a feeling the self-mailer would make it easier for the graduate to respond, thus increasing the response rate. This was not the case in this investigation, in that both the one-page and two-page formats using a return envelope had higher return rates than the self-mailer.

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Table 1

Response Rate by College

College		Questionnaire Format (1)	(2)	(3)	Total
Agriculture	No. Sent	113	113	113	339
	Return N:	27	31	26	84
	Return %:	(23.9)	(27.4)	(23.0)	(24.8)
Arts & Sciences	No. Sent	394	393	393	1180
	Return N:	114	116	89	319
	Return %:	(28.9)	(29.5)	(22.6)	(27.0)
Business	No. Sent	678	677	677	2032
	Return N:	186	169	145	500
	Return %:	(27.4)	(25.0)	(21.4)	(24.6)
Communications	No. Sent	174	174	174	522
	Return N:	54	49	46	149
	Return %:	(31.0)	(28.2)	(26.4)	(28.5)
Education	No. Sent	600	600	601	1801
	Return N:	176	157	155	488
	Return %:	(29.3)	(26.2)	(25.8)	(27.1)
Engineering	No. Sent	60	60	59	179
	Return N:	18	18	16	52
	Return %:	(30.0)	(30.0)	(27.1)	(29.1)
Fine Arts	No. Sent	100	99	99	298
	Return N:	17	26	24	67
	Return %:	(17.0)	(26.3)	(24.2)	(22.5)
Nursing	No. Sent	243	242	242	727
	Return N:	68	54	49	171
	Return %:	(28.0)	(22.3)	(20.2)	(23.5)
TOTAL	No. Sent	2362	2358	2358	7078
	Return N:	660	620	550	1830
	Return %:	(27.9)	(26.3)	(23.3)	(25.7)

Table 2

Average Responses by Item for

Three Questionnaire Formats

Format 1: 2 pages stapled with return envelope
Format 2: 1 page with return envelope
Format 3: 1 page self-mailer

Questionnaire Item	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_3$	F	F-prob.
1. Teaching in major	1.90	1.84	1.85	1.461	.232
2. Teaching in other	2.18	2.12	2.17	1.498	.224
3. Prepared to compete	2.11	2.04	2.12	2.213	.110
4. Course content	1.97	1.94	2.03	1.755	.173
5. Need for first job	2.22	2.14	2.19	.947	.388
6. Academic advising	2.43	2.38	2.38	.401	.670
7. Faculty interaction	2.18	2.11	2.10	1.738	.176
8. Think and express	2.09	2.02	2.09	2.011	.134
9. Dormitory	2.69	2.71	2.75	.338	.713
10. Student activities	2.50	2.43	2.51	2.152	.117
11. Library	1.90	1.89	1.97	1.916	.148
12. Computer access	2.51	2.50	2.85	.565	.568
13. Financial Aids	2.56	2.57	2.62	.717	.488
14. Admissions/Records	2.37	2.33	2.38	.694	.500
15. Career Planning	2.41	2.46	2.55	3.228*	.040
16. Campus Security	2.41	2.44	2.45	.311	.733
17. Kept informed	2.24	2.20	2.26	.891	.411
18. ASU grads on job	2.15	2.10	2.13	.886	.412
19. ASU service	2.30	2.28	2.35	1.338	.263
20. Overall experience	2.29	2.18	2.32	2.255	.106

* $p < .05$